What is masculinity and how masculine can a person be in 2019? When does it become toxic? When does hyper-masculinity break down? Is there a right place and a right time for this? Like most things in life there is no black and white answer. My work is an investigation into my past and present, dealing with the question of masculinity with undertones of humor scattered throughout. I use my past experiences growing up in rural Minnesota on a tree farm, and my time in the Marine Corps to inform my work. The tree farm has supplied me with an analogy for my experience in the Marines. At the age of maturity I was harvested by the Marine recruiter, relocated and processed into a Marine at which point I was a new object to be disbursed where I was needed; much like a tree being harvested at maturity, processed into lumber and then sent out to be used for whatever means applicable. After my time of service concluded, I transitioned from the very structured way of life in the military to the less defined role of a civilian. This came with many unknown struggles. It was like starting all over again in life. There was a lot of tension in this transition. I couldn’t be the person I was trained to be and had to adapt. The Marine Corps had turned me into a standardized cut of lumber, and the return to civilian life was like being hurled back into the forest. Both the transition into the Marine Corps as well as the transition out were fraught with their own frustrations and disappointments.

In my work I use cast sugar to create 2x4’s and cinder blocks, to show the tensions and unsettling expectations of my experience. The expectation of something sweet and satisfying is coupled with quantities that, if consumed, would be toxic. I
relate this to the levels of masculinity expected in the Marines and their toxicity in the
civilian realm. Depending on the process, sugar can be at times malleable, which is a
nod to adapting to a new environment and also alludes to a phrase used in the
Marines, “adapt and overcome.” There is a certain failure of the object and the
expectation of what the object should do. In reading Sara Ahmed’s *Queer
Phenomenology* I found this relevant passage: “…so it is when the hammer is broken,
or when I cannot use it, that I become aware of the hammer as object-in-itself, rather
than as object, which refers beyond itself to an action that I intend to perform. So at
the moment of “failure” the hammer is perceived as having properties; as being, for
instance “too heavy””.¹

These sculptures of cast 2x4s are paired with homemade workout videos
utilizing exaggerated masculine tropes; things like smoking, drinking, guns, and not
wearing a shirt. As well as a process/performance piece where I attempt to chop a
section of a tree into a 2x4 using a hatchet. Chopping the tree while standing on one
of four sets of yellow footprints, the yellow footprints are the first thing recruits see
when they get off the bus and first start recruit training, showing you the proper
orientation of your feet while standing at attention.(Fig 1) Only being able to do this
task of creating a 2x4 from the four cardinal directions is an important element of the
parameters of this piece. There is also a level of absurdity and endurance in the task,
which might be a nod to Francis Alÿs and his *Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making
Something Leads to Nothing)* (Fig 2) where he pushed a block of ice around the streets
of Mexico City until it completely melted. This has been described as having “quixotic
absurdity” according to Encyclopedia Britannica.\(^2\) There is repetition, of forms and movements in my work to reinforce these ideas.

The 2x4s are a stand in for me and the cinder blocks represent the foundation or a weight. This weight can be seen as an object of stability but also an object of burden. A weight that someone carries around with them that is a foundation of who that person is. I believe that a person has to go through some type of adversity for personal development and the cinder block is a visual representation of that.

There is an underlying humor throughout my body of work presented as a coping strategy. Humor has been an underpinning theme in all of my work. The use of humor allows me to talk about serious issues without coming off as too serious or preachy. When times are tough, or at least this is how it is for me, I use humor as a strategy to cope with what is happening. I especially found this true in the Marine Corps; on brutal training days, in the blistering heat of Iraq and other scenarios you don’t expect. Humor and especially dark humor are coping strategies to being human. It is something I have grown up with, dry sarcasm, dad jokes and dark humor especially with my dad’s back story, which I will get into, he has developed an interesting sense of humor. My videos allude to this, working out in the garage with 2x4’s and cinder blocks. It rides the line of is this serious or is this a satire? This reminds me of Baudrillard’s simulacra and simulation where he goes in depth on the relationship between these ideas.

It is no longer a question of the ideology of work—of the tradition ethic that obscured the “real” labour process and the “objective” process of exploration—but one of the scenario of work. Likewise, it is no longer a question of the ideology of power, but the scenario of power. Ideology only corresponds to a betrayal of reality by signs; simulation
corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs. It is always the aim of ideological analysis to restore the objective process; it is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum.³

How acceptable is masculinity in 2019? A difficult question to answer for sure. British artist Grayson Perry deals with masculinity a lot in his work. As a transvestite, Perry has some insightful thoughts on masculinity. There is a line from his book The Descent of Man that jumped out, “Masculinity is mainly a construct of conditioned feelings around people with penises.”⁴ This is because it feels as some men, no matter what the scenario, are aways trying to be the alpha male. His work also dives into ideas of masculinity in Reclining Artist (Fig 3) the artist, who is also the subject (with an obvious nod to Titian’s Venus of Urbino) (Fig 4), adds a much more personal touch with the recognizable domestic space. This space includes personal objects of his interests and hobbies, including his beloved childhood teddybear. When I was in high school I thought masculinity was joining the Marine Corps and going to war, being that kind of bad ass. I soon found out that it wasn’t that simple. What I saw was a bunch of boys ages 18-24 carrying who they thought they were in high school as street credit into their next adventure. My idea of masculinity was very traditional in a sense, growing up in rural Minnesota in a conservative area to a working class family. Part of the reason I joined that Marine Corps was my dad, who had been in the Army. He got his draft notice when he was in high school and before long he was deployed to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. A few months in, and after some close calls, his luck ran out. He got hit; a bullet entered his right eye and exited his right temple. After some facial reconstruction (they took his right float rib to help reconstruct his skull) and then being
fitted for a glass eye he was discharged, with a Purple Heart, Bronze Star with “V”
device for actions of valor and some other medals. Of course an injury like that has
certain sustaining trauma, TBI, PTSD and constant headaches to name a few. Growing
up there were a lot of appointments at the Veteran’s Affairs Medical Center where I saw
many other disabled veterans. Needless to say, my idea of what it meant to be a man
was made more extreme by my father’s experiences.

Going into Recruit Training my vision of who would be there was skewed. By no
means was I the biggest, toughest or meanest guy but I had some expectations and
thought others would prepare like I had. This was not the case and I was a bit
disappointed by this. I will never forget a moment toward the end of Recruit Training,
during a process called The Crucible. The Crucible is a 54 hour event where you march
just shy of 50 miles with 45 pounds of gear and mixed in there are a whole host of
challenges, drills, obstacle courses, gas chamber etc., while only getting two MREs
(Meals Ready to Eat) throughout the duration.\footnote{During this event I remember hiking up
one of the hills, I was in the back as they put taller people in the back and shorter
people up front so it would be easier when marching for the platoon so the tall ones
didn’t out stride the shorter ones. One of the shorter recruits was falling behind and
eventually started to fall back. When he reached the back of the pack of the platoon
we were told to grab his gear, pack and rifle because there was no sense in losing a
body and a rifle and rations. I ended up with some of his gear which I was okay with
but what happened next is what got to me. Our Senior Drill Instructor (the highest
ranking Drill Instructor of our platoon) was carrying him up the hill “princess style”\cite{Fig}
and he still passed. This wasn’t one of those no man left behind situations either.}
Witnessing that in Recruit Training made me skeptical on who else they let in. This shows through in the cast 2x4s sagging and becoming limp due to their weight and the material. This is apparent in *Frankie Says Relax* (Fig 6) where the hot sauce infused cast 2x4 over time sags closer to the floor and seems to engulf more and more of the cinder blocks.

Transitioning out of the military is something that I didn’t think would be difficult or take very long at all; move back to the Midwest and be with friends and family. I was free again, and could do whatever I wanted. One has to completely reevaluate the situation they are in. Something the Marines do not train you for though is what happens when your time in service ends? If you do not choose to stay in and reenlist, you attend some classes dubbed Seps and TAPS which stands for Separations and Transitions Assistance Program. These programs were pretty much telling you that you can still reenlist, go be a cop or firefighter or if worst comes to worst go get a business degree and create your own business. I slowly started to realize that the transition from active duty Marine to civilian was going to be a difficult one. In an article; “US Military Veterans’ Difficult Transition Back to Civilian Life and the VA’s Response” it talks about this challenging period. “Young veterans regularly observe the military does an extremely effective job of training them to operate within the military and an extremely poor job of reversing that training.”⁶ You are used to a very strict schedule, shaving every day, haircuts every week, uniforms, work etc… to complete freedom. But you are on your own for the next part of your journey. The cast 2x4 themselves are trying to “fit it” to their new environment and morph around the cinderblocks. They are transitioning into something new but securing themselves to the cinderblocks. In
another article related to the previous one, “Transition From the Military Into Civilian Life: An Exploration of Cultural Competence” dives into the culture of the military and the rules are simply different using Bourdieu’s theories from The Logic of Practice “three interrelated tools of habits, field and capital which together explain how cultural settings operate according to the own internal logic.” There is an entire Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and each branch of the military has their own rules, codes of conduct, leadership traits, principles etc…

How do these materials translate into my concepts? Sugar is an interesting material, with more negative effects than positive when it comes to diet and health, especially when the quantity is increased. The estimated lethal dosage of sugar is around five and a half pounds which is roughly half of what each of the cast 2x4s weigh. Recently we have started to learn how toxic sugar can be for us, how addictive it is, and how it is added to so many foods and drinks that we consume. The idea circles back to masculinity and how much is too much? It’s a strange space to be in and I can’t help but think of the novel turned film Fight Club, which is potentially more relevant now than in the mid and late 90’s.

In “Men and the Nostalgia for Violence” Boon talks about a struggle or frustration men are facing today; how can I still be a man without being too manly but manly enough so I don’t go insane.

Fight Club addresses the impossibility of satisfying the contradictory cultural demands placed on men, who in relinquishing power, are expected to renounce the traditional, defining rituals of manhood while continuing to fulfill the functions those rituals were designed to prepare them for: to physically defend without imposing themselves on anyone else, to conquer without dominating, to acquiesce with surrendering, to control the environment without being controlled, to
attain victory without defeating anyone, and to remain ready to fight without fighting.  

The United States of America loves to tout its military, how it is the best in the world, the most successful, how important it is to freedom because as you have heard; Freedom Isn’t Free. What is behind the red, white and blue, the bald eagle, guns, bumper stickers, or state mottos (New Hampshire’s being a personal favorite “Live Free or Die”)? (Fig 7) What is patriotism? What does having pride in “the troops” really mean? Support the Troops brother! Never Forget! From my experience in the Marines, with two tours in Iraq, I can’t remember being over there thinking, yeah, 9/11, this is for America, this is for Freedom. I was more or less trying to stay alive and stay sane. At that moment you are so far removed from everyday life that the concept of it is as foreign as the soil you’re standing on. You fight for the person next to you, not for a certain idealistic goal. These ideas are talked about at length in Tribe by Sebastian Junger.  

“…but when they come home they realize that the tribe they were actually fighting for wasn’t their country, it was their unit.” Signing up for those ideologies happened years prior when you signed on the dotted line, which was actually a solid line. I am reminded of a passage from Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22”.

“You see? Imagine a man his age risking what little life he has left for something so absurd as a country!” he declared.

Nately was instantly up in arms again. “There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!” he declared.

"Isn't there?" asked the old man. "What is a country? A country is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries, usually unnatural. Englishmen are dying for England, Americans are dying for America, Germans are dying for Germany, Russians are dying for Russia. There are now fifty or sixty countries fighting in this war. Surely so many countries can’t all be worth dying for.”
"Anything worth living for," said Nately, "is worth dying for."12

Every year when Veteran’s Day rolls around there is a strange disconnect and the awkward moment when all of a sudden people you haven’t heard from since Veteran’s Day the year before reach out and say: “Thank You for Your Service” and signs popping up ”Don’t Forget to Thank a Vet” is a nice gesture and all but what do you say? “You’re Welcome” seems insincere, I mean I didn’t shoot Bin Laden or rescue Prisoners of War. On that day I truly feel like an “other” or at least have a faint understanding of what is feels like for a few moments. Depending on where you work you may get the day off, free coffee, doughnuts, free lunches, or dinners, *excludes alcohol. You feel like you get put on display, exploited. With my workout series of video, I am putting myself on display as the actor or trainer in the videos for you to follow along with at home but no names are given, no workout plan is shared, and no instruction for how much weight or how many reps. Will following this workout plan even work? This is reminiscent of Chris Burden’s earlier work where there is a level of endurance and potential violence against the body. In “Chris Burden Extreme Measures” he talks about his older work, especially Shoot (Fig 8), and is not trying to grand stand violence but bring it into a new context through performance art.13

My work deals with masculinity, humor and trying to find a place for it but being let down and seeing the monotony of trying to figure out the answer through repetition, repetition of forms, and repetition of movements. It also deals with my time transitioning into and out of the Marine Corps. At the end of the day there is only one real question that remains and that really matters: Do you even lift, bro?
Bibliography


Appendix

Figure 1 Yellow Footprints outside MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot) San Diego, California https://www.marines.mil/Photos/igphoto/2001610034/

Figure 2
Francis Alÿs Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)
http://francisalys.com/sometimes-making-something-leads-to-nothing/
Figure 3 Grayson Perry, *Reclining Artist*, 2017

http://www.artnet.com/artists/grayson-perry/reclining-artist-large-a-HnH7rF7axGrQpBDUwdjndA2

Figure 4 Titian, Venus of Urbino, 1538

https://www.titian.org/venus-of-urbino.jsp
Figure 5  Chandler holding Rachel “Princess style” from the television show *Friends*


Figure 6 *Frankie Says Relax*, 2018 Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 7 New Hampshire License Plate (University of New Hampshire Option)
https://www.unh.edu/main/licenseplate

Figure 8 Chris Burden, *Shoot* 1971
